Helen's "Judgment of Paris" and Greek Marriage Ritual in Sappho 16

Eric Dodson-Robinson

Arethusa, Volume 43, Number 1, Winter 2010, pp. 1-20 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/are.0.0032

HELEN'S "JUDGMENT OF PARIS" AND GREEK MARRIAGE RITUAL IN SAPPHO 16

ERIC DODSON-ROBINSON

Sappho 16 begins with one of the most famous priamels in Greek literature (16.1–4):

> O]ἰ μὲν ἰππήων στρότον, οἰ δὲ πέσδων,
> οἰ δὲ νάων φαῖσ' ἐπ[ὶ] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν
> ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν' ὅτ-
> τω τις ἔραται
>
> Some say a host of cavalry, others of infantry, and others
> of ships, is the most beautiful thing on the black earth,
> but I say it is whatsoever a person loves.[1]

The imagery of the priamel has occupied considerable scholarly attention since the fragment's discovery and publication in the early twentieth century. Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer (2000) explains the desirability of the land and naval forces in the priamel with the argument that the comparison of Anactoria to Helen gives the poem's persona the role of Menelaus; Nancy Worman (1997.168) follows "the movement of bodies in the visual field" from the exemplary bodies of cavalry and infantry to the familiar body of Anactoria, the absent beloved; and C. M. Bowra (1961.183) interprets these lines as an

1 All citations of Sappho and Alcaeus refer to the text of E.-M. Voigt 1971 unless otherwise noted; the translations are based on Campbell 1994.

Arethusa 43 (2010) 1–20 © 2010 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

opposition between martial values and ἔρως.[2] I have three interconnected arguments to make about Sappho 16, beginning with the interpretation of the priamel: first, I assert that the priamel's evaluation and judgment of what is most beautiful (κάλλιστον) is what John Foley calls a "traditional reference" to the judgment of Paris. Second, I argue that by unexpectedly making Helen rather than Paris the judge of what is κάλλιστον, the poem focalizes erotic agency from her perspective and portrays her as a conflicted subject. I then argue that Helen's "judgment of Paris" and her ambiguous subjective role should be read in light of the poem's references to archaic Greek marriage ritual. While André Lardinois (2001, 2003) makes a case that Sappho 16 *is* a wedding song, my own reading focuses on the poem in relation to key aspects of the marriage ritual—particularly the mock abduction of the bride—which are left unexplored by Lardinois.[3] I conclude with a brief speculation about possible audience responses to Sappho 16 in two different performance contexts: an archaic wedding and a gathering of intimate ἑταίραι (companions).

PARIS AND HELEN'S JUDGMENT

Traditional referentiality, as John Foley (1991.7) defines it, "entails the invoking of a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself, that brings the lifeblood of generations of poets and performances to the individual performance of text." Before discussing how traditional references evoke the judgment of Paris myth in fragment 16, I would first like to outline the functioning of similar techniques in Alcaeus 42. Alcaeus 42 is particularly relevant because it is topically

---

2 Segal 1998.66 makes a similar argument, as does Helene Foley 1998.60–61, who claims that the priamel opposes public achievement with individual desire. Most 1981.14 identifies the infantry and cavalry with "Menelaus and all other values associated with him," and compares the logic of the poem's progression with the rhetoric of the appeal to authority—namely Helen—as described by Aristotle. For additional references to earlier scholarship on the priamel, see Barkhuizen and Els 1983 and Koniaris 1967.257 note 2.

3 Lardinois argues that Sappho 16 is a wedding song based on intertextual evidence and generic criteria, such as the encomium of the bride / lament for the bride (2001.85–86, 89; 2003.276–78), and on Greek associations of Helen with marriage that made her a "prototypical bride" (2001.84); also see Lardinois 2003.279. I am more interested in the fragment's references to marriage ritual and in how these references relate to Sappho's version of the judgment of Paris and Helen's abduction. As I discuss below, I believe that the poem could have been—and probably was—performed in a variety of contexts.

related to Sappho 16, derived from the same Lesbian tradition, and written in the same meter during the same historical timeframe.[4] Alcaeus 42, which D. L. Page (1955.278) characterizes as "brief and allusive," begins with a notoriously reproachful apostrophe addressed to Helen.[5] The setting then shifts to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis with a seemingly abrupt transition: "not such . . ." (οὐ τεαύταν . . . 42.5). There is a gap between the story of Troy's destruction, recounted in the first stanza, and the second stanza's encomium of Thetis, which celebrates the marital harmony she shares with Peleus.

It is such gaps, Wolfgang Iser (2001.1676) asserts, that stimulate the audience to "fill in the blanks with projections." While the poem explicitly draws a contrast between Helen and Thetis, there is also an implicit structural parallel that emphasizes this contrast: Paris abducts Helen from the halls of Menelaus, while Peleus leads Thetis in marriage from the halls of Nereus. I would like to call particular attention to the parallel between marriage (Thetis) and abduction (Helen) that the poem exploits in order to contrast divinely sanctioned marriage with the civically disastrous abduction. The similar structure provokes consideration of the many contrasts between the two episodes and of how they are connected. As John Foley (1991) argues, tradition provides continuity and fills the gaps in archaic Greek poetry and other traditional discourses. Traditional poetry is metonymic, operating as a *pars pro toto* discourse that conveys "principally *inherent*" meaning (Foley 1991.7–8). The reference to Helen and the Trojan War in the first stanza of Alcaeus 42 evokes a broader context: the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the judgment of Paris, the abduction of Helen, and the siege of Troy—to which the poem returns in the fourth stanza: all pervasive motifs in archaic art and thought.[6] The audience supplies the narrative relations between the poem's explicit content and the immanent content of a shared tradition. The first stanza states the result of the Trojan War and interrogates the audience: why did grief seize Priam, and why did his city burn? The next stanza, which refers to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis and to the birth of Achilles, recalls the history that leads to the answer (42.5–8):

---

4 See Race 1989 for a comparison of Alcaeus 42 with Sappho 16. Race argues for the "romantic" primacy of emotion in Sappho's poetry, and contends that, in comparison with Alcaeus, Sappho subordinates plot. I find that this interpretation does not take account of Sappho's use of traditional referentiality to evoke narrative.

5 See Howie 1977.221–22 for further discussion of this topic.

6 See, for example, Scaife 1995.166, 171, 178.

οὐ τεαύταν Αἰακίδᾱι[ς
πάντας ἐς γάμον μάκ[αρας καλέσσαις
ἄγετ᾽ ἐκ Νή[ρ]ηος ἔλων [μελάθρων
πάρθενον ἄβραν

Not such was the delicate maiden whom the noble son of Aeacus, inviting all the blessed gods to the wedding, married, taking her from the halls of Nereus.

What the poem omits, tradition supplies. It was at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis that Strife began the quarrel among Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera over the golden apple marked for the "most beautiful."[7] Zeus selected Paris to judge the dispute. When Paris gave the prize to Aphrodite, he received Helen from the goddess as a reward; Menelaus's desire to take Helen back resulted in the Trojan War. This gapped information is essential to understanding Alcaeus's poem. Although it is not the project of this paper to fully explore Alcaeus 42 or the contrasts it draws between Helen and Thetis within the referentially supplied narrative of the Trojan War, this comparative example should demonstrate the evocation of narrative context and logical connections through use of and, just as importantly, strategic omission of, traditional motifs in archaic Greek lyric.[8]

---

7 The first literary source for the judgment of Paris is *Iliad* 24.28–30. See Littlewood 1968.149–51 and Rose 1991.128 note 17 for a list of early sources of this myth, which include fragments of the *Kypria*, Proclus's epitome of the *Kypria* in the *Chrestomathia*, and allusions in several plays of Euripides—a detailed treatment of which appears in Stinton 1965. In his treatment of the judgment of Paris and the apple of discord, Littlewood 1968.151 writes: "This legend is one of the oldest attested themes in this study, since the crucial scene is depicted by a relief on an ivory comb found in the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta and dated from its presence among Proto-Corinthian pottery to c. 700 B.C. It shows a bearded man seated on a low throne and holding out with an elongated left arm a large, spotted sphere to three female figures, who may be identified by their accoutrements or accompanying birds as Aphrodite, Athene, and Hera." For more on the iconography in archaic art, see Scaife 1995.178–80; also Hurwit 2002, with bibliography, for a relevant analysis of the Chigi vase.

8 Scaife 1995.180 argues that in the earliest Greek iconographic representations, artists juxtapose episodes from the *Kypria* in a similar manner: that is by sequentially arranging scenes according to implicit causal relations that must be supplied by the narrative tradition. Although I strongly suspect that the scenes Scaife explicates derive primarily from a flexible and interconnected oral and iconographical tradition rather than from what we would consider a fixed text (the fragmentary *Kypria*), his observations about the referential codes of archaic iconography are illuminating and, I argue, analogous in many respects to those of archaic poetry.

Sappho 16 begins with a meditation about what is most beautiful (κάλλιστον), and proposes that it is whatever one loves. While the "Homeric" quality of the martial imagery in the first stanza and the situation of the poem within the general frame of reference of the Trojan war have been manifest since the fragment's discovery, I argue that the juxtaposition of martial/naval imagery with objectified erotic desire, in the context of a judgment about what is κάλλιστον, specifically recalls the judgment of Paris. The first words of Sappho 16 list cavalry, infantry, ships, and the object of desire (κῆν' ὄττω τις ἔραται, 3–4) as possibilities competing for the title of most beautiful.

According to the myth of the judgment of Paris, Hera offered Paris power and Athena offered him victory in war as bribes, yet Paris chose Aphrodite, who offered him marriage to Helen, the most beautiful mortal woman. After the judgment, Aphrodite instructs Paris to build a fleet of ships (Procl. *Chrest*.). Regardless of whether the ranks of horsemen, the armored soldiers, the fleet of ships, and the object of desire in Sappho's poem hypostatize these choices in one-for-one correspondences, they are what John Foley 2008.3 would call σήματα (signs), signifiers that "point toward larger concerns or ideas that would otherwise remain hidden." The deliberation about what is κάλλιστον frames these σήματα, evoking an inherent reference to the judgment of Paris and establishing the expectation that the poem will address the narrative of Helen and the siege of Troy.

Reading the poem diachronically, the second stanza both confirms and reverses the expectation established in the priamel (16.5–12):

> πά]γχυ δ' εὔμαρες σύνετον πόησαι
> π]άντι τ[ο]ῦτ', ἀ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα
> κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἐλένα [τὸ]ν ἄνδρα
> τὸν [πανάρ]ιστον
> καλλ[ίποι]σ' ἔβα'ς Τροΐαν πλέοι[σα][9]
> κωὐδ[ὲ πα]ῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων το[κ]ήων
> πά[μπαν] ἐμνάσθ‹η›, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ' ἄϋταν
>
> It is perfectly easy to make this understood by everyone:
> for she who far surpassed mankind in beauty, Helen, left
> her most noble husband and went sailing off to Troy with

9 Greek text of lines 8–9, Campbell 1994.

> no thought at all for her child or dear parents, but . . .
> led her astray.

Helen is the subject. In performance, even if some among the audience had missed the references to the judgment of Paris in the *prooimion*, the mention of Helen's name in the context of assessing what is most beautiful would have firmly established the judgment of Paris as the broader traditional narrative encompassing and connecting these metonymic references.

Yet while the name "Helen" confirms and emphasizes the cognitive category established by the judgment of Paris references in the first stanza, the focus and agency of the traditional myth have shifted from Paris to Helen. Paris was chosen by Zeus to judge the goddesses' beauty because he was the most attractive human male.[10] Helen is chosen by Aphrodite because she is by far the most beautiful human being (πόλυ περσκέθοισα κάλλος ἀνθρώπων, 16.6–7). According to tradition, Paris must make a judgment about what is most beautiful and chooses an object of erotic love. Correspondingly, Helen must make a judgment of a similar sort in the Sapphic version of the myth. Helen's choices are similar, yet not the same as Paris's. In the traditional myth, although Paris does not want to act as judge or face the inevitable consequences of his judgment, he nevertheless disregards his parents and the interests of the city as a whole to seize an objectified erotic desire. Paris desires Helen, yet his choice in the judgment is a forced choice. In Book 3 of the *Iliad*, for example, Paris tells Hector (65–66),

> οὔ τοι ἀπόβλητ' ἐστὶ θεῶν ἐρικυδέα δῶρα
> ὅσσά κεν αὐτοὶ δῶσιν, ἑκὼν δ' οὐκ ἄν τις ἕλοιτο·
>
> Not to be cast aside are the gods' glorious gifts, whatever
> they might give, but no one would take them willingly.
> (my translation)

In archaic depictions, Paris attempts to flee the judgment, and there was a substantial discourse concerned with the tension between agency and compulsion in Paris's decision.[11] Similarly, Helen makes an unwilling choice

---

10 See Rose 1991.106–07, Littlewood 1968.150.

11 See Scaife 1995 for more on this topic and for an example of a vase painting in which Paris flees from the judgment, attempting to avoid his role as judge and the consequences of his decision.

in Sappho 16 to pursue Paris, the object of her desire. Although the poem says she forgot her parents, her child, and the most noble man/husband, the poem brings these same people to the audience's immediate attention by naming them. The aorist aspect of ἐμνάσθη means that at the moment of her judgment, she took no account of the people closest to her. She does not wish to abandon everyone who is dear to her, nor do they permanently leave her memory. Having established the traditional reference to Paris's judgment, the poet reverses the audience's expectation: in the traditional myth, Paris is the subject of judgment and Helen is the object; in Sappho 16 she is the subject, while Paris is the object of *her* desire.

Helen is not only the judging subject of Sappho's "judgment of Paris," however; she is also a conflicted subject.[12] Page duBois argues: "Sappho's poem, although not a narrative, in fact reverses the pattern of oral literature of the Homeric poems—men trading women, men moving

---

12 Helen's ambiguous characterization leads to one of the many problems in the fragmentary text, namely the emendation of line 12. Campbell 1982.270 writes, "Page suggests something like αὐτίκ' ἰδοῖσαν (or οὐκ ἀέκοισαν)." Neither suggestion is satisfactory. "Not unwilling" (οὐκ ἀέκοισαν) simplifies Helen's emotions and agency in a manner uncharacteristic of Sappho's typical portrayals of the conflicting emotions associated with desire. It also denies the reversal from subject to object that takes place within the extant text, and, most important of all, it neglects the power of Aphrodite, which Sappho's other works hold in intimate awe. Bowra 1961.184 notes that divided feelings about love characterize Sappho's poetry, and prefers Milne's αὐτίκ' ἰδοῖσαν (Bowra 1961.180), as does Koniaris 1967.265. Yet, αὐτίκ' ἰδοῖσαν, as Koniaris admits (1967.265 note 1) is simply the romantic cliché "love at first sight" translated back into the Greek. Although variants of αὐτίκ' ἰδοῖσαν appear in Homer, its use in the context of Sappho 16 does not capture the conflicting emotions of Helen.

I suggest that the emendation κωὐκ ἐθέλοισαν, which has surely been proposed before, deserves more serious consideration. Garner 2004 shows that metrical and morphological variants of the phrase οὐκ ἐθέλων occur extensively throughout Homer and appear in the Homeric Hymns, Archilochus, Solon, and Theognis. In general, the phrase has a semantic range implying a decision to act under compulsion and with conflicting emotions. For example, the speaker of Archilochus 5.2 left his shield "unwillingly," οὐκ ἐθέλων. He made a decision to do so as a conscious agent, yet under the compulsion of saving his life. As throwing away one's shield destroyed one's virtue (ἀρετή) entirely according to Tyrtaeus 8.14, this is an ethical choice of great consequence, and Archilochus asserts that life is more valuable than a shield and ἀρετή put together. More relevant to the specific context of Sappho 16, variants of the phrase occur in scenes of abduction or rape. In the "Hymn to Demeter" 124, the disguised goddess says that she came from her home unwilling (οὐκ ἐθέλουσα), under the compulsion of Cretan pirates. At *Iliad* 6.165, Anteia deceives Proetus, telling him: [Bellerophon] μ' ἔθελεν φιλότητι μιγήμεναι οὐκ ἐθελούσηι ("[Bellerophon] wanted to make love to me, but I was unwilling" [my translation]). Further, the variant of the formula that occurs in Sappho 1 occurs in the same metrical position as the lacuna of Sappho 16, the Adonean close of the Sapphic stanza.

past women." DuBois sees Helen as "an 'actant' in her own life, the subject of a choice exemplary in her desiring" (1996.86–87). Although I believe the patterns of relations between men and women in Homeric poetry are more complex and varied than duBois suggests, Helen is clearly the "subject of a choice" in Sappho 16: Helen decides that Paris is most beautiful, and decides to sail to Troy with him. Yet in the third stanza, Helen becomes an object again in another dizzying transformation that duBois does not mention (16.11–12): . . . ἀλλὰ παράγαγ' αὔταν / . . .] σαν ("but . . . led her astray").

Most commentators agree that it is Aphrodite who leads Helen astray (παράγαγ').[13] If this is the case, the poem evokes the power of the goddess: Helen chooses to go with Paris, but she is led by Aphrodite. According to the mythic tradition, Helen is not Paris's, she is Aphrodite's: a gift the goddess gives to Paris.[14] The second and third strophes emphasize the people whom Helen leaves behind, those who are dear (φίλοι) to her. Thus, while duBois is right that Helen is an "actant," she is a complex and conflicted actant.

Margaret Williamson (1996.260) notes the ambiguity of Helen's agency in Sappho 16:

> Women who move from one side to another, as marriage or love partners, have an ambiguous status: they are both subjects and objects of the exchange, theft, and reparation . . . [Helen] both chooses Paris and is chosen by him, both abandons and is stolen from her husband, exchanges and is exchanged.

This differs substantially from the evaluation of duBois (1996.87), who remarks: "Helen is one who acted, pursuing the thing she loved, and for that action Sappho celebrates her." Thus while duBois focuses on Helen as actant, Williamson's reading of Helen's character emphasizes her ambiguous subjective status. Nancy Worman (1997.167–68) also discusses the ambiguity of Helen's agency in the poem in an intricate argument about the "unavoidable body logic" (1997.170) of desire in the visual field. She

---

13 Campbell 1982.270, Most 1981.16 note 32, Kirkwood 1979.108, Howie 1977.216.
14 E.g., *Iliad* 3.64–66, Procl. *Chrest*.

describes the ambiguity of Helen's body in terms of ὄψις: Helen is simultaneously viewing subject and viewed love object.[15]

What I would like to add to this discussion is that the fragment's reference to, and transformation of, the traditional myth of the judgment of Paris shifts the focalization of agency in the traditional judgment scene from a male to a female perspective.[16] Substituting Helen for Paris as the active judging subject establishes a structural equivalence between Paris's erotic agency and Helen's. The similarities between Paris's and Helen's roles as conflicted subjects are discussed above. As Worman makes clear, Helen's ambiguous agency in Sappho 16 is not new. In Homeric portrayals of Helen, her agency is *already* ambiguous: compulsion, agency, persuasion, desire, and divine intervention are all implicated in Helen's abduction in Homeric poetry (Worman 1997.157).[17] Yet in Sappho 16, not only is Helen a conflicted subject, but her subjective status is defined by transposing Helen's and Paris's roles in the traditional version of the judgment. Agency and judgment are considered from her vantage, not Paris's. What is more, the ἔγω (3) of the fragment, who invokes the myth, affirms Helen's judgment, whereas Lillian Doherty (1995.127–33) argues that Helen and other powerful women in Homeric poetry are often circumscribed and contained by internal narrations and by "the larger frame provided by the epic narrator" (127). Thus not only does traditional myth give depth and texture to the explicit ambiguity of Helen's agency in the poem that Williamson (1996), Worman (1997, 2002), and others have noted, but the transformation of tradition results in an unexpected shift of perspective.

MARRIAGE, MYTH, AND RITUAL

Helen's ambiguous agency and other aspects of her narrative in fragment 16 have parallels in Greek marriage ritual. A number of the poems attributed to Sappho are *epithalamia*, composed for performance at particular weddings, and others relate closely to marriage.[18] Lardinois (2001 and

15 Also see Worman 2002.155–56. Helene Foley's (1998) chapter comparing reciprocity in Sapphic/Socratic erotics is also of interest.

16 See Doherty 1995 for a feminist reading of narrative focalization in key passages from the *Odyssey*.

17 Also see Segal 1998.63 and following.

18 E.g., 44, which may in fact be an *epithalamion:* Calame 1997.232. Lardinois 2001.89 argues: "Sappho was perhaps most famous in antiquity for her wedding songs. At least

2003) cites the praise for Anactoria (the bride) and lament for her absence as generic markers typical of the Greek wedding song, and adds that Helen was often associated with marriage (see note 3 above).

I would now like to explore several references in Sappho 16 to Greek marriage ritual, many of which have escaped notice, in part because archaic Greek ritual is so foreign to the modern marriage ceremony. The explicit reference to Helen's abduction in the second strophe is a clear example. Although Lardinois mentions Paris's abduction of Helen, he explains: "Her abduction by Paris could be imagined as a descent into the underworld, for example in Euripides' *Helen*. This association makes her presence in a mixed wedding/lament song all the more appropriate" (2001.84). I submit that there is an immediate correspondence between the abduction of Helen and Greek marriage, which enacted a ritual "through which the painful departure of the bride was accomplished" (Avagianou 1990.9). This ritual included, in many places, a mock abduction (Avagianou 1990.115). In fact, the ritual of "hand on the wrist" (χείρ' ἐπὶ καρπῶι), in which the groom grasped the bride by the wrist as a gesture of physical control, and the act of lifting the bride into a chariot—both of which were essential to the ceremony throughout Greece—could be considered part of such a mock abduction (Avagianou 1990.116).[19] The abduction of Helen is a mythic parallel to the ritual reenactment of abduction that many Greek brides experienced.

When a woman married, she passed from her paternal οἶκος (household) to that of the groom (Redfield 1982.187–88). In myth, Helen is married to Menelaus when Paris abducts her and therefore is no longer attached to her parents' household. Yet the third stanza of Sappho 16, which names the people Helen disregards when she follows Paris, emphasizes her child and *parents*. In fact, Menelaus's name does not appear in the extant fragment. In comparison, Alcaeus 283, which also recounts the abduction of Helen, focuses on Helen's child and her husband's bed (283.7–8):

παῖδά τ' ἐν δ̣ό̣μ̣[ο]ισι λίποις [
κἄνδρος εὔσ̣τ̣ρ̣ω̣τ̣ο̣ν̣[λ]έχος .[

---

one book, probably the ninth, in the Alexandrian edition of her poetry consisted wholly of wedding songs, while other marriage songs were included among the other eight books." Also see Page 1955.125 and Contiades-Tsitsoni 1990.71.

19 Also see Sourvinou-Inwood 1987.139, Redfield 1982.191, Sourvinou-Inwood 1973.16–17, Jenkins 1983.137–41, Topper 2007.82.

> leaving in her home her child and her husband's bed with
> its rich coverlet

Sappho 16's abduction condenses two scenes: Helen's abduction and the mock abduction of the bride. Mention of Helen's parents emphasizes a separation from the paternal household like the separation that occurred when a woman married. To push the significance of Sappho's emphases to the extreme, one might argue that the characterization depicts the concerns of a bride departing from her "own" household (οἶκος): that the "most noble man" (πανάριστος ἀνήρ) at the end of the second stanza corresponds not only with Menelaus but also with her father in his role as the head of the household who gives the bride away in the betrothal rite called ἐγγύη (Redfield 1982.188); the τοκῆοι correspond with the bride's parents in their biological relation to her; the child (παῖς) corresponds with the bride herself, who feels abandoned and expelled by the people who had previously loved her the most.[20] The correspondences are neither discrete nor static, however. Rather, the language condenses two scenes and associates the emotions of Helen with the bride and the poem's persona.

There are also verbal suggestions of marriage ritual in Sappho's account of Helen's abduction: the verb "to lead astray" (παράγειν) in the third stanza connotes marriage, as the verb ἄγειν used in the middle means to marry.[21] Lardinois (2001.84 note 41) points out that it is Aphrodite who seems to be leading Helen in 16.11–12, and that "It was Aphrodite's characteristic role at weddings to persuade the bride and lead her to the groom."[22] In visual representations, Aphrodite often leads the wedding procession (Oakley and Sinos 1993.31). The very name "Helen" resonates with the word "torch" (ἑλάνη), with "to seize or to grasp, to choose" (ἑλεῖν, aorist infinitive of αἱρέω), and with ἕλεν (the third singular aorist of αἱρέω).[23] The

---

20 The emphasis on separation of child from mother (whether animal or human) is a standard motif of the Greek wedding song: e.g., Sappho 104(a), Catullus 62 (Seaford 1986.51–52). Also see Segal 1998.65 for a comparison of Helen's position in *Iliad* 3 with the position of the new bride who has left her parents' home.

21 See, for example, Alcaeus 42.7. Sappho 44.14–17 also makes repeated use of *–agein* compounds in the description of the wedding of Hector and Andromache, exemplifying verbal contextual echoes similar to those in fragment 16.

22 Also see Seaford 1987.117.

23 The carrying of bridal torches was very important in the marriage ceremony (Parisinou 2000.28–34, 42 note 83; Oakley and Sinos 1993.26), and the ritual of grasping the bride's wrist has been discussed above. See Skutsch 1987 for a lengthy analysis of Helen's name and its etymology.

Lesbian poetry of Sappho's contemporary, Alcaeus, puns on Helen's name, contrasting her with Thetis (42.7–8; see p. 4, above).

The first stanza of Alcaeus's poem addresses Helen and the Trojan War, the second recounts the marriage of Peleus and Thetis. ἕλων in the second stanza resonates with [Ἄλεν'][24] in the first, emphasizing the difference between the two at the phonological level, in parallel with the poem's contrast of characterization. Iconographic representations in geometric art depict Helen in the grasp of Paris, who holds her "hand on wrist" (χείρ' ἐπὶ καρπῶι) and embarks with her aboard a ship.[25] The abduction scene was a popular motif in geometric art, and the "hand on wrist" motif associates iconographic depictions of Helen with depictions of the marriage ceremony.

The procession of cavalry, soldiers, and ships in the opening stanza of Sappho 16 also evokes associations with archaic Greek marriage. Bowra asserts that the imagery represents "the masculine world of war" (1961.183). The martial imagery, however, has associations not only with war but also with victory processions and with marriage ritual. R. H. Hague demonstrates (1984) that wedding processions and victory processions for panhellenic winners—both of which Aphrodite Avagianou situates within the broader category of initiatory ceremonies—were very similar:[26]

> The wedding procession is parallel to that of the triumphant homecoming of the victor of the Panhellenic games. The wedding is to the bride what victory is for men: φυλλοβολία/pelting with flowers and fruits, praising songs with makarismos for victor / and for the groom, since the bride is a γέρας for him. (quoted in Avagianou 1990.16)

The chariot in particular, which Bowra (1961.183) says "Sappho chooses . . . as one of the most stylish elements in the masculine world of war," is the vehicle of Aphrodite in Sapphic poetry. In Sappho 1, Aphro-

---

24 Supplement by Campbell 1994.

25 See Langdon 1998.266–68 for examples of this motif in geometric art. For an explication of a later example of this motif on a fifth-century *skyphos*, see Oakley and Sinos 1993.32–33.

26 See Avagianou 1990.1–18 for a summary of marriage rites in ancient Greece.

dite descends to Sappho in a chariot drawn by swift sparrows.[27] Further, the chariot has specific associations with marriage: chariots are ubiquitous in the wedding processions represented in vase painting.[28] Sappho 44 describes such a procession. The "orthodox wedding-coach" that carries the bride and groom "is generally the *quadriga*, rarely the *biga*" in both black-figured and red-figured vase-paintings (Lorimer 1903.132). As for the actual ritual procession in the archaic period, the bride and groom may have ridden in a chariot or in a cart: the vehicle probably varied according to class, because chariots "would be in the possession of the richest citizens only" (Lorimer 1903.134). Even if a horse-drawn or mule-drawn cart carried the couple, chariots and horsemen followed in depictions of upper-class wedding processions, as in "The Wedding of Hektor and Andromache" (Sappho 44.13–17):

> αὔτικ' Ἰλίαδαι σατίναι[ς] ὑπ̣ὲ̣ ἀτρόχοις
> ἄ̃γον αἰμιόνοις, ἐ̣π̣[έ]βαινε δὲ παῖς ὄχλος
> γυναίκων τ' ἄμα παρθενίκα[ν] τ . . [. .] . σφύρων,
> χῶρις δ' αὖ Περάμοιο θυγ[α]τρες[
> ἴππ[οις] δ' ἄνδρες ὔπαγον ὑπ' ἄρ[ματα
>
> At once the sons of Ilus yoked the mules to the smooth-running carriages, and the whole crowd of women and (tender?-) ankled maidens climbed on board. Apart (drove) the daughters of Priam . . . and unmarried men yoked horses to chariots.

Thus for the archaic Greek audience, the procession of "military" imagery in the priamel and in the fifth strophe of Sappho 16 conveyed nuptial associations that a twenty-first century mentality does not associate with martial display.

Yet in Sappho 16, it is the face and walk of Anactoria that the speaker yearns to see above all else: the bride in Greek weddings was

---

27 Also see Sappho 194, in which Sappho has Aphrodite drive a chariot into the bridal chamber itself.

28 E.g., London 1920.12–21.1, London B 174, London B 298, Toledo 1970.2. Also see Oakley and Sinos 1993, especially 29 figure 66; see Blundell 1998.50 for a typical fifth-century example of a wedding procession with chariot on an Attic red-figure *pyxis*. The shield ekphrasis attributed to Hesiod 274 also mentions a chariot in the context of a marriage.

veiled (Ferrari 2005.32, Oakley and Sinos 1993.32). Although it is not clear at what occasion or occasions during the wedding the veil was removed, some evidence suggests that an unveiling ceremony (ἀνακαλυπτέρια) took place after the wedding procession and even after the bride and groom had spent their first night together (Avagianou 1990.135).[29] At any rate, the bride was almost certainly veiled during the procession to the marriage chamber (Ferrari 2005.32–33). The beauty of Anactoria's walk resonates with fragments 103 and 103B, in both of which Sappho speaks of "the bride with her beautiful feet" (εὔποδα νύμφαν).

There are also more general associations connecting Helen with Greek marriage. Lardinois documents (2001.84) Helen's prevalence in wedding songs and her depiction as a bride in vase paintings. As for ritual associations with the myth, the Greek wedding enacted not only a mock abduction, but also a ritual attempt at rescuing the bride. The abduction of Helen, which I discuss above, and the resulting siege of Troy are mythic analogues to these rituals. After the torch-lit procession from the bride's house to the house of the groom, the doorkeeper (θυρωρός) guarded the wedding chamber where the couple spent their first night together (Oakley and Sinos 1993.37). According to Pollux, his job was to repulse the women trying to "rescue" the bride (Redfield 1982.191). Redfield argues that although elements of the marriage ceremony such as the mock abduction and the doorkeeper's thwarting of the bride's friends in their attempt to rescue her "imply that the wedding is after all a rape" (1982.191), the ἀνακαλυπτέρια (unveiling ceremony) and other parts of the ritual indicate that marriage "requires consent" (192, 198 note 11) of the bride. Isabelle Clark (1998.14) makes a similar argument about the ambiguity of the marriage ceremony:

> Marriage is associated with themes of rape and of violent subjugation. At the same time, the wedding is represented in other contexts as a romanticized event at which the bride and groom are attended by Eros and figures associated with beauty, harmony and concord. The ideology of

29 For a different view, see Redfield 1982.192, 199 note 11. See Ferrari 2005.32–35 for an explanation of the ἀνακαλυπτέρια, a summary of the conflicting evidence about when the bride may have been unveiled, and references to literary and iconographic depictions of the unveiling.

> marriage is therefore complex and includes a spectrum of different perceptions.

During the marriage ritual, then, the bride formally makes a choice—whether willingly or under some degree of persuasion or compulsion. Yet she also enacts a role in which her husband physically seizes her and takes her into his household. The ritual ambiguities parallel ambiguities in the myth of Helen's abduction foregrounded in Sappho 16. Thus the ambiguity of Helen's status as subject in the poem has structural parallels with the subjective status of the Greek bride during the wedding.

In *Poetry as Performance*, Gregory Nagy, through a comparative study of Navajo initiation ritual, shows how "the distinction between myth and ritual merges" in Sappho's poetry (1996.88). I argue that traditional referentiality in Sappho 16 consists in the evocation not only of traditional narratives, but also of ritual performances associated with those myths—performances that often entail intense emotion. Thus the interwoven references to marriage ritual and to myth in Sappho 16 make the lament for Anactoria emotionally engaging for the audience. The connections between marriage ritual and the references to the judgment of Paris and Helen's abduction are particularly important.

In considering *how* these interwoven ritual and mythic references might have affected Sappho's audience, I would like to consider two possible performance scenarios: a choral song at a wedding and a recital among ἑταίραι.[30] If it were sung at a wedding, Sappho 16 would have been

---

30 The "original" performance context cannot be definitively determined based on the currently available evidence, nor can the questions and controversies about performance be adequately addressed here. Generally, Merkelbach 1957 and Calame 1997 favor choral performance, with Sappho as leader of a cult or school of young girls; Gentili 1984 concentrates on the social parity of poet and audience; Parker 1993 casts doubt on the construction of Sappho as "schoolmistress" and argues for a sympotic context; Nagy 1996 favors "group" sympotic performance; Stehle 1996 distinguishes between poems performed chorally, poems performed for a circle of older women, and intimate poetry addressed to lovers; and Lardinois 1994 and 1996 defends the view that Sappho's poetry was performed chorally by young girls and doubts that it was suitable for monodic performance. See Greene 1996 for opposing perspectives; somewhat more recently, Ingalls 2000 argues that Sappho composed ceremonial poetry for choral performance by young girls as part of their cultural education. Regarding the performance context of Sappho 16 in particular, while there is a strong possibility that the poem was composed for performance at a wedding, as Lardinois argues (2001, 2003), the traditional references to myth and ritual in Sappho 16 could have been effective in more than one context, regardless of the set-

performed by a chorus of women (Lardinois 2001.84), most likely after the departure of the bride and groom but before or during the mock rescue attempt: Anactoria, in this case, is the absent bride. Both the marriage ritual and the abduction of Helen in Sappho 16 emphasize a "painful departure" (Avagianou 1990.9). Lardinois discusses the performance aspects of the lament for the departed bride at Greek weddings, ancient and modern, in relation to this poem (2001, 2003). I would like to add that the poem's reference to Helen's abduction merges with the audience's emotionally charged experience of the bride's mock abduction. If we consider the second and third stanzas from the perspective of the bride's family and friends, we understand that the poem expresses, *through a reference to myth*, emotions traditionally expressed in the lament of those she leaves behind: κωὐδ[ὲ] . . . οὐδὲ . . . πάμ[παν] ἐμνάσθ‹η› carries a tone of anguish. There is the pathos of abandonment, anger, and a visionary longing to see Anactoria's face. The audience's emotional experience of Anactoria's departure from her former home and initiation into her new life is thus structured by the marriage ritual, and the ritual, in turn, enacts traditional myth: a link made physical in the act of hand on wrist (χείρ' ἐπὶ καρπῶι).

Ambiguous agency and the interaction of compulsion, persuasion, desire, and choice characterize both marriage ritual and fragment 16's treatment of the Helen myth. Sappho focalizes the "judgment of Paris" from Helen's perspective, portraying her as a conflicted subject whose judgment corresponds in many ways with Paris's forced choice, as I discuss above. Again, if we assume the context of a wedding performance, Sappho's transformation of the judgment of Paris myth is particularly significant. The poem credits Helen with agency in her choice of husbands, yet acknowledges that the choice itself was made under divine compulsion. While the bride's agency in the wedding ceremony is also ambiguous and subject to divine persuasion, Sappho's transformation of the judgment myth offers the audience more than simply a mythic analogue to this ambiguity: Sappho's version emphasizes a woman whose agency, as a judging subject, is *equivalent* to that of the man she desires. This perspective makes Helen, and by extension Anactoria, significantly more than a γέρας (prize) for the groom. Furthermore, Sappho's version makes the mythic bride a conflicted, judging subject without judging her harshly in turn: a perspective that differs from

---

ting of the first performance. Because the poems were disseminated widely, eventually to a panhellenic audience, Sappho 16 might have been performed at more than one wedding and/or at numerous banquets or symposia soon after its composition.

the reproachful tone of Alcaeus 42, which assigns to Helen both agency and severe censure.[31]

Yet despite the many associations between marriage ritual and the myth of Helen's abduction, the marriage of Paris and Helen is the antithesis of the sacred marriage of Hera and Zeus (Avagianou 1990) or of its human equivalent that promotes civic order. Might not Sappho 16, then, be a personal lyric borrowing the generic markers of the wedding song and using references to myth and marriage ritual in order to metaphorically communicate longing for an absent beloved? Let us now consider the monodic performance of such a lyric by the poet among ἑταίραι at a small gathering, whether sympotic or otherwise—possibly soon after the marriage of the absent beloved. This would be an aristocratic audience of peers (Gentili 1984): the references to marriage ritual and the abduction of Helen evoke memories common to all who have witnessed a wedding, such as the splendor of the procession, the seizing of the bride's arm, her ritual abduction, and the lament for her absence. Accompanying such memories are the strong, conflicting emotions expressed in the traditional wedding songs, particularly the pain of separation, which Stehle (1996.294) argues was "a painful reality for women." This is so regardless of the causes of the beloved's absence—whether because of marriage or because of the pursuit of another man or woman. The poem's references to ritual and myth, focalized from a female perspective, work together to communicate to the audience the persona's conflicting emotions about Anactoria. She acknowledges the agency of the beloved in making a choice that has caused her pain, but does not blame her excessively, suggesting instead that Anactoria, like Helen or like the traditional bride, was led by the divine persuasion of Aphrodite.

Whatever the original performance context of Sappho 16 may have been, the poem's mythic references evoke the traditional narratives of Paris's judgment and Helen's abduction. The unexpected transposition of Helen's and Paris's roles in the judgment myth emphasizes a structural equivalence between male and female erotic agency. Both man and woman are subjects of judgment in several senses: both are subject to the persuasion of desire—and its consequences; both are conflicted judging subjects; each judges the other to be most beautiful; and each pursues the other at great cost. This transposition of the traditional myth also focalizes erotic

---

31 Although Segal 1998.64 is correct that the verb "to lead astray" in Sappho 16 expresses a hint of blame, he concedes that this also exonerates Helen by acknowledging the role of divine persuasion.

agency through Helen's perspective—and provokes the audience to do the same. The third party, the persona who is left behind, mourns Anactoria's absence. Her lamentation elicits the powerful conflicting emotions associated with marriage rituals, and these emotions, in turn, make the poem's myths of judgment, desire, and separation immediate for the audience.

University of Texas at Austin

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Avagianou, Aphrodite. 1990. *Sacred Marriage in the Rituals of Greek Religion*. New York.

Barkhuizen, J. H., and H. G. Els. 1983. "On Sappho, Fr. 16 (L.P.)," *AClass* 26.23–32.

Blundell, Sue. 1998. "Marriage and the Maiden: Narratives on the Parthenon," *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, Sue Blundell and Margaret Williamson, eds. New York. 47–70.

Bowra, C. M. 1961. *Greek Lyric Poetry.* Oxford.

Calame, Claude. [1977] 1997. *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece* (trans. Derek Collins and Janice Orion). Lanham.

Campbell, David A. (ed.) 1982. *Greek Lyric Poetry* (new ed.) London.

———. (ed., trans.) 1994. *Greek Lyric: Sappho and Alcaeus*. Cambridge.

Clark, Isabelle. 1998. "The Gamos of Hera: Myth and Ritual," *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, Sue Blundell and Margaret Williamson, eds. New York. 12–41.

Contiades-Tsitsoni, E. 1990. *Hymenaios und Epithalamion: Das Hochzeitslied in der frühgriechischen Lyrik.* Stuttgart.

Doherty, Lillian Eileen. 1995. *Siren Songs*. Ann Arbor.

duBois, Page. [1978] 1996. "Sappho and Helen," in Greene 1996.79–88. (Orig. pub. *Arethusa* 11.89–99.)

Ferrari, Gloria. 2005. "What Kind of Rite of Passage Was the Ancient Greek Wedding?" *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives*, David Brooks Dodd and Christopher A. Faraone, eds. London. 27–42.

Foley, John. 1991. *Immanent Art.* Bloomington.

———. 2008. *Homer's Traditional Art*. University Park.

Foley, Helene. 1998. "'The Mother of the Argument': Eros and the Body in Sappho and Plato's *Phaedrus*," *Parchments of Gender: Reading the Bodies of Antiquity*, Maria Wyke, ed. Oxford. 39–70.

Garner, R. Scott. 3 March 2004. "Meter and Phraseology in Archaic Lyric." Paper presented at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in Urbana, Ill.

Gentili, Bruno. 1984. *Poesia e pubblico nella Grecia antica da Omero al V secolo*. Rome.

Greene, Ellen (ed.) 1996. *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*. Berkeley.

Hague, R. H. 1984. "The Wedding in Ancient Greece and its Songs." Doc. Diss. Amherst, Massachusetts.

Howie, J. G. 1977. "Sappho fr. 16 (LP): Self-Consolation and Encomium," *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar 1976.* Liverpool. 207–35.

Hurwit, Jeffrey M. 2002. "Reading the Chigi Vase," *Hesperia* 71.1.1–22.

Hutchinson, G. O. 2003. *Greek Lyric Poetry*. London.

Ingalls, Wayne B. 2000. "Ritual Performance as Training for Daughters in Archaic Greece," *Phoenix* 54.1/2.1–20.

Iser, Wolfgang. 2001. "Interaction Between Text and Reader," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. New York. 1673–81.

Jenkins, I. 1983. "Is There Life After Marriage?" *BICS* 30.137–45.

Kirkwood, G. 1979. *Early Greek Monody: The History of a Poetic Type*. Ithaca.

Koniaris, George. 1967. "On Sappho Fr. 16 (L.P.)," *Hermes* 95.3.257–68.

Langdon, Susan. 1998. "Significant Others: The Male-Female Pair in Greek Geometric Art," *AJA* 102.2.251–70.

Lardinois, André. 1994. "Subject and Circumstance in Sappho's Poetry," *TAPA* 124.57–84.

———. 1996. "Who Sang Sappho's Songs?" in Greene 1996.150–72.

———. 2001. "Keening Sappho: Female Speech Genres in Sappho's Poetry," *Making Silence Speak: Women's Voices in Greek Literature and Society*. André Lardinois and Laura McClure, eds. Princeton. 75–92.

———. 2003. "Drie gedaantes van Helena: Moderne interpretaties van Sappho Fr. 16," *Lampas* 36.4.261–83.

Littlewood, A. R. 1968. "The Symbolism of the Apple in Greek and Roman Literature," *HSCP* 72.147–81.

Lorimer, H. L. 1903. "The Country Cart of Ancient Greece," *JHS* 23.132–51.

Merkelbach, R. 1957. "Sappho und ihr Kreis," *Philologus* 101.1–29.

Most, G. W. 1981. "Sappho Fr. 16.6-7 L-P," *CQ* 31.1.11–17.

Nagy, Gregory. 1996. *Poetry as Performance, Homer and Beyond*. Cambridge.

Oakley, J. H., and R. H. Sinos. 1993. *The Wedding in Ancient Athens*. Madison.

Page, D. L. 1955. *Sappho and Alcaeus*. London.

Parisinou, Eva. 2000. "'Lighting' the World of Women: Lamps and Torches in the Hands of Women in the Late Archaic and Classical Periods," *G & R* (2nd ser.) 47.1.19–43.

Parker, Holt N. 1993. "Sappho Schoolmistress," *TAPA* 123.309–51.

Pfeijffer, Ilja Leonard. 2000. "Shifting Helen: An Interpretation of Sappho, Fragment 16 (Voigt)," *CQ* 50.1.1–6.

Race, William H. 1989. "Sappho, fr. 16 L-P. and Alkaios, fr. 42 L-P.: Romantic and Classical Strains in Lesbian Lyric," *CJ* 85.1.16–33.

Redfield, James. 1982. "Notes on the Greek Wedding," *Arethusa* 15.181–201.

Rose, H. J. [1928] 1991. *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*. New York.

Scaife, Ross. 1995. "The *Kypria* and Its Early Reception," *ClAnt* 14.1.164–92.

Seaford, Richard. 1986. "Wedding Ritual and Textual Criticism in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*," *Hermes* 114.1.50–59.

———. 1987. "The Tragic Wedding," *JHS* 107.106–30.

Segal, Charles. 1998. *Aglaia: The Poetry of Alcman, Sappho, Pindar, Bacchylides, and Corinna*. Lanham.

Skutsch, Otto. 1987. "Helen, Her Name and Nature," *JHS* 107.188–93.

Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane. 1973. "The Young Abductor of the Locrian *Pinakes*," *BICS* 20.12–20.

———. 1987. "A Series of Erotic Pursuits: Images and Meanings," *JHS* 107.131–53.

Stehle, Eva. 1996. *Performance and Gender in Ancient Greece: Nondramatic Poetry in Its Setting*. Princeton.

Stinton, T. C. W. 1965. *Euripides and the Judgment of Paris*. London.

Topper, Kathryn. 2007. "Perseus, the Maiden Medusa, and the Imagery of Abduction," *Hesperia* 76.1.73–105.

Voigt, Eva-Maria (ed.) 1971. *Sappho et Alcaeus Fragmenta*. Amsterdam.

Williamson, Margaret. 1996. "Sappho and the Other Woman," in Greene 1996.248–64.

Worman, Nancy. 1997. "The Body as Argument: Helen in Four Greek Texts," *ClAnt* 16.1.151–203.

———. 2002. *The Cast of Character: Style in Greek Literature*. Austin.